

Let the Light from the Lighthouse Shine on Me



I must have some magnetic attraction to Fraser Island, or it to me. One way or the other I keep going back there. In June of 2006 Yvonne and I had what can only be described as an interesting experience camping on the ocean beach, being blasted by the wind and drenched by the rain. I was trying to get Von to fall in love with this wild and wonderful place as I have done, won over by the romance of camping on the beach. But, thwarted by the relentless elements, at best I only succeeded in establishing a respectful acquaintance between the two.

That year I was to return to the island in September with 'the boys' for the annual Taylor fishing pilgrimage and it was during this trip when we made the traditional foray to Sandy Cape for the day,



Don Scott with Ethel & Wes Ford in September 2006



Sandy Cape sunrise – we were to see many of these

that someone had the radical idea that we should walk up to the Lighthouse. Now, we have parked on the beach at the start of that walk every year I have been going to Fraser, but the thought of actually checking out the Lighthouse, rather than standing around drinking cans of beer and getting on with the fishing, had never before found its way through anyone’s grey matter to be aired and considered.

With new blood on the team though, this time it was different. Michael Schimanski, Don Scott and I walked the walk to discover the lighthouse. Once there, we met Wes and Ethel Ford from Victoria, not that I knew their names at that stage, and learned they were volunteers who were staying at the lighthouse for a few weeks doing jobs and weather reports and the like. What a great idea. Mick and I both began contemplating the prospect, storing the information for further consideration once back home.

If I had been more observant and actually looked at the windows in the lighthouse basement, I would have seen the contact details where those interested in volunteering could get more information. As is normal with me though, I didn’t see that, but spent time going through a more convoluted process on the internet before striking gold with an email address for Aub Strydom, the last keeper of the light and now a Parks and Wildlife Ranger in charge of the lighthouse area.

Yvonne had recovered from the Fraser wind and rain of last June by the time I wondered out loud what it would be like to live at the Lighthouse for a while. At least, I mused, we would have a solid roof over our heads. A spark of interest, ‘when would we go?’ she asked. A review of the 2007 calendar quickly identified that with Tasmania in February and the big overseas trip in May, the end of March into April was the only time practical. Wow! 2007 was going to be some year.



Ian & Alison, Yvonne and I with “Ranger” Julie

And so it was that on 29th March 2007, on our way to the Cape, we pulled up at the Ranger station at Dundabura to meet Julie Dutoit, the ranger in charge of the Volunteer Program at the Lighthouse, Aub being on leave.

I'd formed a mental image of Julie after exchanging emails before we left home. I figured she was probably middle aged and if you'll (and Julie if she reads this) forgive the term, 'solid' in regard to her figure and a robust person to be doing a ranger's job.

Gee I make a habit of being wrong don't I.

Julie is young and so slightly built there's almost nothing of her, but definitely robust in character and fortitude! In fact we were later to meet Chrissy at Waddy Point, who is also a lean young lady of Buddhist persuasion, doing a similar job to Julie. Must be a trend. I must give up being so presumptuous.

We signed some forms – more forms that is – we'd already filled out and faxed lots of forms



Alison releases Loggerhead hatchlings

Loggerhead turtles, being part of a real tsunami alert, seeing the magnificent White Bellied Sea Eagles, kites and a huge variety of other birds together with dolphins and sharks in their natural elements, all made for an incredible two weeks. And that is not to mention the weather reporting, but we'll come to that soon.



Gordon 'doing' the weather

from home. There seemed to be forms to be filled out for just about everything but once those formalities were out of the way, with Julie's good wishes and a promise she would visit in a couple of days for an official induction, we headed off for our new adventure.

And what a grand adventure it was. Notionally at least, being in charge of a Lighthouse, getting involved with hatchling



Eager hatchlings make it to the surf

Our mentors, trainers and transitional house mates were Ian and Alison, who with friends Grahame and Adriene were completing their voluntary tour of duty at the front line. Ian and Alison are veterans of this caper and, unlike the tension, excitement and some nervousness that I'm sure Yvonne and I displayed during our first few days, they exuded a very calm, casual and relaxed approach to just about everything, making us feel more at ease and also welcome as part of the team, for which we were most grateful.



On our very first day, Alison had a super surprise for us. She had kept eight Loggerhead turtle hatchlings from a group that had made their way to the water that morning. So, as the sun was setting low across the calm waters at the Cape, we saw for the first time, these amazing little creatures stumble and weave their way across the beach with flippers flapping wildly, drawn irresistibly to the mysteries and dangers of the ocean and the beginning of their incredible journey of life.

Turtle trails in the sand

When Alison said that only one in a thousand will survive to return and nest so many years later, it tinged the event with sadness to think that the prospect that any of these, our first Loggerheads, would survive the precarious ocean environment full of predators waiting patiently to welcome them as they rushed headlong into the surf, was almost nil. I wished them well in their world, as we in ours, returned to the security of the barracks and a hot dinner. I don't think I'll choose to return as a turtle.

We witnessed another two hatchlings make their way to the waiting waves a couple of nights later but the following day we were in for a real surprise. We'd driven up to the Cape to retrieve a 'turtles basking in the sun' sign that Julie wanted brought back to the Lighthouse. Yvonne decided we should check the nesting cage as we were going past. It was mid-day and very hot. As we started walking to the cage, it was as though the sand and dune grasses were alive – we had stumbled across over a hundred turtles making their way to the water at the worst time possible, their biological clocks haywire.



Yvonne with a baby loggerhead

We watched for a minute or two, captivated by the magic of the moment, not immediately aware that we were witnessing a potential tragedy in the making. It was Von who realized first that some of the turtles were visibly wilting in the sun, so, not knowing if we were doing right or not we set about saving 'our

babies'. We collected all we could locate, putting them in a bucket with some moist sand and then hurriedly returned to base where we gave them more room in a large plastic storage bin in the cool of the laundry.



Gordon with 'mobile 23' at Bool Creek

driven by the callings of ancient time. I wondered if Igor knew of the challenges that awaited him (or her) within the breaking waves.

We buried those who had not survived the mid-day sun then back at base marveled at the event again as we watched our photos and videos on the laptop, proud that despite our ignorance we had managed to save so many of the hatchlings, but at the same time sad we hadn't been able to save them all. Still it was a good feeling to know that we had given so many the chance of a lifetime in such a danger ridden lifetime of chance.

One of the main jobs for the volunteers is recording and reporting the weather three times a day starting at 6am every morning. Ian, our trainer and weather man extraordinaire had this down pat.

"I get up at ten to six" he said, "I'm finished by about ten past, so can go back to bed – or whatever".

For most people this of course is a very logical thing to do, particularly when you are supposed to be on holiday, well, a working holiday anyway. Plus, I thought, what a gallant chap he is, being a martyr and doing the early shift so Alison can stay in bed a bit longer. But I'll have more to say on that in a minute.

We eventually counted one hundred and eight, many, still excitedly trying to climb out of their plastic nest but many others who unfortunately could no longer make that effort.

That evening as the sun was setting we returned to the beach and released those who had survived their mistimed first foray into the big world. Seventy six finally made it to the foaming surf, led by Igor the Brave. We decided that for every hatching there is an Igor, more focused, faster and maybe more reckless than the rest, charging ahead,



At the weather office computers



Clouds – a beauty, but a beast to describe

mind and Ian, looking like he'd just got out of bed, which he had, ten minutes after that, all of us willing if not ready to visit the vagaries of the weather.

“Bows and flows of angels hair with ice cream castles in the air
And feather canyons everywhere, I've looked at clouds that way”

Aah, the romance when old Blue Eyes croons of the clouds. Reality is though that the Bureau of Meteorology aren't interested in ice cream castles and feather canyons, caring only for CU2s or SC4s, Altocumulus and Cirrostratus and let me tell you, Old Blue Eyes quickly turns into Cranky Frankie when there is more than one opinion on the make up of the clouds.

For me though, being unable to sit still for more than five seconds and being compulsive obsessive about almost everything, including being early, first to be ready and wanting to do my share plus everyone else's, I said to Von, “we'll (notice the we'll) be up at 5.30am for a coffee and be ready to go when Ian gets up. And that's how it happened, me stumbling around in the half dark putting the kettle on and trying unsuccessfully not to wake everyone in the process. Von appearing ten minutes later in her normal 'this is not my best time of day' frame of



Clouds can cause conflict



Gliding gracefully ready to dine out

By day two, my respect for Ian had grown immensely as I came to realize that for him, taking the early shift alone had nothing to do with gallantry and being a kind caring soul, it was more to do with preserving his marriage! He had long since learned what Yvonne and I quickly discovered. There were some tense moments to be had in those first days as we discussed, nay let's be honest, argued about clouds and Ian had his own strategy to avoid this. We did persevere though, doing

most of the reports together and we gradually got better at reaching a clouds consensus (whether it was right or not is an entirely different matter).



Yvonne and the South African ‘hunks’

that area. Most of the other weather reporting instrument readings and entering data into computers and what do you know, by the end of the two weeks we were even working as a team. Funny how after thirty years together we still need lots of practice.

The other weather event that warrants a mention was the Tsunami warning issued after a Solomon Islands earthquake on 2nd April. Yvonne and I had been out working and returned for a cuppa only to discover a message on the phone advising of a pending tsunami and giving instructions to advise campers on the beach if we could, but to be off the beach by 10am no matter what. It was



**The Master’s Apprentice –
Installing a water pump with Ian**

However, as time progressed, I must admit to “gallantly” offering to do a couple of early mornings by myself, much to Von’s delight, although she quickly lay bare my real motives peeling away the thin veil of gallantry when, as soon as I was finished the report, I snuck back into bed and snuggled up to her warm body - I need say no more.

Reporting the state of the sea had the potential to be as stressful as the clouds, but fortunately Von wasn’t very interested in it and let me make my own mistakes in it and let me make my own mistakes in it was easy once learnt – just taking



Yvonne trying to catch dinner

already nearly half past nine.

There was no decision to be made – we just got back in the Ranger’s mobile 17 and headed down to the beach. There were two families camped there that we knew of, plus four hunky South African’s who had given us a huge blue fin tuna fillet just two days before and there was no way Yvonne was going to let anything happen to them – the hunky boys that is.

We hurriedly found and warned them of

the danger, inviting them to drive up to the lighthouse – bummer the rules – then headed back there quickly ourselves, hoping not to see a towering tidal wave tearing across the Break Sea Spit towards us.

All the drama just fizzled out though. Bit of a shame in a way. By the time we had returned to barracks a new message informed us of downgraded warnings and would we please advise campers of same. So, back in the vehicle – you can guess the rest.



Coaxing ‘Genny’ the generator

Amazingly it wasn’t long before we were packing up to leave. The two weeks alone at the lighthouse had gone so quickly and we were left with memories of fixing water pumps and pipes, firing up the old generator in a shower of sparks by shorting out the starter motor with a screwdriver, painting stakes for next years turtle nests, weeding at the Bunkers and all the other jobs we did.



Atop the massive sand dune at Sandv Cape

We had memories of the ‘punters’, all the folk who made the long walk up the hill to see the Lighthouse and to whom we proudly told (the little bit we knew) of the history of the place and turtles and what we did, seeing the glint in some of their eyes as they imagined themselves standing in our bright volunteer shirts with the embroidered lighthouse logo.

We had memories of catching enough fish for a couple of feeds and watching the beautiful, graceful birds of prey glide effortlessly above the surf and sand in search of their next meal. Of the shark’s fin we saw slicing through the water in a crazed pattern at a terrifying speed until the jaws below the surface clamped shut on an exhausted victim.



Is that a turtle basking in the sun?

We had memories of the people we had met. Our mentors, Ian & Alison, the rangers, Ray and Rod who came to fix the generator and stayed over for a night that had us laughing a lot at the ‘Lord Mayor of Poyungan Valley’ and we remembered the hunky South Africans who knew how to catch big fish.

And making our way home over the next two days, our eyes were frequently drawn through the car window to the clouds as we thought of the next crew who would be

‘discussing’ the sky for the six am weather report.

We arrived back home safely but tired. Tired not only from the drive but tired from the efforts of the two weeks. The rules say that in return for free accommodation, volunteers do four hours work per day. But this is on top of the weather reporting and both Yvonne and I found ourselves being ‘on the go’ most of the time.

Ian and Alison seem to have it worked out by making sure they get a ‘nana nap’ and a ‘man-o-pause’ most afternoons – we’ll have to try that next time. Oh yes, there will be a next time, it’s just a matter of time. I asked Von on one of the days if she thought she wanted to come back and the answer was a very positive yes, almost before I’d finished the question. This was great because at that time she was covered in sand fly bites, tired from getting up much earlier every day than at home and probably worn out from arguing about clouds with me, but we were having an exciting time sharing new experiences and both loving it.



The sun sets on our Sandy Cape experience

Next time though we will go armed with a box of happy pills and a label that reads – “one to be taken half an hour before assessing clouds – if pills do not have desired effect, resolve issue by going back to bed”.

Written by Gordon Tuthill - April 2007